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SUBJECT: 1,200 MARCH TO MARK CHERNOBYL DISASTER

REF: VILNIUS 293

¶1. (SBU) About twelve hundred peaceful demonstrators attended the opposition's annual Chernobyl March April 28, which followed a state-approved route from the Academy of Sciences past Minsk's Bangalore Square to a small church dedicated to victims of the Chernobyl tragedy 22 years ago. In spite of a significant uniformed and plainclothes police presence, and the participation of a phalanx of young men thought to be agents-provocateurs, the march ended without incident.

¶2. (SBU) Included among the marchers were Aleksandr Milinkevich, former presidential candidate and leader of the "For Freedom" movement, and Igor Rynkevich, Deputy Chair of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party-Gramada (BSDP-G). Both were among the co-chairs of the event. For Freedom, Belarusian Christian Democracy, United Civic Party and BSDP-G flags and insignia were visible in the crowd.

The Belarusian Popular Front and Malady Front -- mainstays of opposition actions in the past -- were notably absent.

Many Diplomats Observe, Germans Conspicuously Absent

¶3. (SBU) Charge led a four-person team of U.S. diplomats who observed the demonstration. Our team joined a contingent of EU observers, including France (DCM), the European Commission Delegation (Charge), Slovakia (Charge and DCM), the Czech Republic (DCM), Lithuania (Ambassador and poloff), the United Kingdom (Charge), Hungary (Charge), Romania (Ambassador), and Poland (poloff). The European observers noted that Germany, with perhaps the single largest EU mission in Belarus, was conspicuous in its absence. State media interviewed Charge and A/DCM, as well as the Romanian Ambassador and French DCM.

Independent Web Sites Attacked Before and After March

¶4. (SBU) As with past opposition demonstrations, in addition to pre-march detentions (reftel), opposition web sites were disabled by denial of service attacks. Charter97.org and Radio Liberty's Belarusian service (svaboda.org) both noted being the targets of such attacks, while Byelorusskiy Partizan (Belaruspartisan.org) was also off-line for a time on April 28.

Comment

¶5. (SBU) Opposition leaders had privately set goals of 5,000 participants for this march. Turnout of just 1,200, in spite of perfect weather, is both a disappointment and perhaps a sign that

the regime's expanded repression against demonstrators demonstrations is having an effect. We have seen comments on opposition websites suggesting some activists now fear arrest and imprisonment as a result of long sentences against political prisoners Andrey Kim and Sergey Parsukhevich. While denial of service attacks against independent internet sites have occurred previously, Radio Liberty has never been targeted with such tenacity or for such a long duration. This is no doubt yet another instance of GOB pressure against the United States and U.S.-sponsored independent broadcasting.

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